

# *All my students are reading the same book and they're successful: An inclusive teaching approach*

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*A model for programming proposed by Taylor, Short, Frye and Shearer (1992) was adapted and trialed by classroom teachers (R-9) to investigate how a single text could be used as a basis of instruction for all students in a class. The main focus, though, was to explore how an approach indicated by the model could support students with learning difficulties in the development of literacy skills. Teachers wrote summaries of the single texts and used them for teaching skills that included phonemic awareness, decoding and comprehension. The research provided positive indications that this approach could successfully be used as part of a whole class literacy program.*

## **Introduction**

Catering for diverse groups of literacy learners in a classroom is a daily challenge for teachers. Those students with a learning difficulty may readily be identified, but the dilemma for class teachers is how to plan, program and facilitate learning experiences that allow these students to access, participate in, and be successful in their literacy learning. While teachers may wish to provide withdrawal support for students with literacy learning difficulties, the reality is that most of these students spend much of their school day in the classroom. Additionally, while teachers may see withdrawal as a preferred method of support, some students don't want to participate in these programs. This may be because of actual or perceived peer group pressure with comments made about their low literacy levels, or they may not want to be away from the classroom and miss out on what everyone else is doing. We are reminded that regular, small group instruction with explicit and systematic instruction assists with the development of faster reading gains (Vaughn et al. 2002, Torgesen et al. 2001) and Winebrenner (1996) states that real literature is ideal for reading programs, provided that it is used to teach reading and writing skills.



## *An action research project*

An action research project initiated and managed by the Learning Difficulties Support Team (DETE, South Australia 1999) explored whether a junior primary in-class programming support model proposed by Taylor et al. (1992) might be a literacy intervention that teachers could successfully implement and manage in their classroom. Moving beyond the junior primary years, the team also investigated if the model could be used with older primary and secondary students.

The teachers (Reception–Year 9) who volunteered to be involved in the research project were provided with a grant to purchase resources, have preparation time and fund replacement teachers when they attended professional development sessions. The questions to be explored by the teachers were:

1. How can I use a single text to provide opportunities for inclusive learning?
2. Under what circumstances can I advance the reading skills of the targeted students using a single text for the whole class?

Associate Professor Colin MacMullin (Flinders University) provided information about the principles of action research and teachers were asked to keep a journal that documented their planning, programming and the outcomes of each literacy intervention session. The descriptive notes were to contain the teachers' best efforts to record objectively the details of what had occurred, along with a description of the students, setting, account of events and activities. The reflective notes were for teachers to reflect critically on their teaching methods, to provide impressions and to express feelings and hunches about what they had done and were about to do. Additionally, information was shared about the reading intervention model and suggestions were made about how teachers might plan and organise their research. The benefit, for teachers, of using action research was highlighted by Associate Professor MacMullin who stated that it was:

A systematic process whereby practitioners voluntarily engaged in a spiral of reflection, documentation and action in order to understand more fully the nature and/or consequences of aspects of their practice with a view to shaping further action or changing their situation preferably in collaboration with colleagues.

With the use of action research the teachers were going to be in a constant spiral of action and reflection where they critically reviewed the outcomes of a day's literacy lesson and subsequent lessons were planned based on this feedback.

The aims of the research were to have teachers provide an inclusive, within-class model for programming that provided an approach that



included a small group focus for targeted students. It was believed that if this approach showed positive outcomes it could be promoted as a less expensive option than a withdrawal program. Additionally, another perceived advantage was that the targeted students would receive assistance from the educator who knew most about their current knowledge, skills and abilities. It was considered that the approach would be part of each teacher's literacy program and that teachers would continue to provide their usual range of literacy learning activities. Additionally, some teachers saw it as being a useful approach when the entire class was undertaking a class novel or an author study.

### ***What did the approach look like in Years 1 and 2?***

Class teachers used professional judgement when including students in the targeted junior primary group, supporting their nomination with the use of diagnostic identification processes. These included assessment of student skills in phonemic awareness, alphabet knowledge, sight word identification, decoding, comprehension and rate of reading. Running Records were used in order to collect some of this information. Numbers in the target groups ranged from four to seven.

In Years 1 and 2 the materials needed for the intervention were single picture books and, at the first level, 40 to 60 word summaries of the picture books. These summaries were composed by the teachers and written on three to four large pieces of card to be used at group reading times, and small summary booklets were made for each student. The summaries in the booklets were identical to those written on the large cards and were similarly across three to four pages.

The individual teachers varied their ways of working to suit the needs of their students, although a number of processes were similar. On the first day the teacher introduced and read the book to the class, clarified pronunciation and meaning of key vocabulary, and modelled strategies of text prediction and decoding. After the teacher had read the text and confirmed comprehension, the non-targeted students were given independent follow-up tasks about the text. The range of activities often used included cloze, maze, lazy letters, correcting silly sentences, countdowns, story maps, picture and sentence sequencing and matching words with pictures.

While the non-targeted group was engaged with the post-reading activities, the teacher used explicit instruction in phonemic awareness, decoding and comprehension with the targeted group. The teacher read the summary charts to the students and the group read along with the teacher and provided oral retells about what they had read. Summary booklets with numbered pages, a cover, back and separate title were given to students to collate. The teacher and students then selected from three to five phonically regular words from the summary. With teacher assistance, these words were segmented into phonemes and blended



together by using phoneme boxes and counters. (A series of two boxes □□ was used for two-phoneme words such as *my*, with three boxes □□□ for three-phoneme words such as *hat*, and so on.) The children put one token in a box for each sound they 'heard' in a word.

The students wrote the words, with ample teacher guidance, in their own phoneme boxes. Following on from this activity, students were asked to collectively compose a sentence about the story and to write it in the back of their summary booklet. The teacher provided sufficient guidance to allow them to successfully complete the task but encouraged students to do as much as possible by themselves. The emphasis was on highlighting phoneme/grapheme correspondences and aspects of sentence construction.

On the second day the non-targeted students continued with their post-reading activities while the teacher had the targeted group provide an oral retell of the text. They then chorally re-read the summary on the cards and the teacher provided further practice in isolating, segmenting and blending phonemes. The teacher and students developed another sentence about the story that they wrote in the back of their summary booklet. Students were asked to begin to illustrate the pages of their booklet and the teacher, or a paraprofessional, listened to them read the summary and their sentences, and confirmed that they had comprehended what they had read. Emphasis was placed on the development of word attack strategies by the teaching of specific skills. Allied with this approach was the sharing of ways for students to self-monitor their reading comprehension.

On day three the teacher worked with non-targeted students on the development of a particular reading skill while the targeted group continued with their illustrations and practised reading their summary booklet and sentences with a peer. The teacher then took the targeted group through a re-reading of the summary and another sentence about the story was written in the back of their booklet. The primary focus again, was on the development of word attack and comprehension monitoring skills. Some teachers used pieces of card to cover words on the summary sheets and asked students to suggest what the covered words might be. Others had students each read a different sentence from the summary cards and then to locate that sentence in their booklet. Another popular activity was to select a word from the chart and to have students think of other words that began with the same phoneme/grapheme.

It was in this session that the teacher took a Running Record of students reading their summary booklet. The successful target was considered to be an accuracy rate of 90% and confirmation that they had sound recall of the text. To reinforce reading skills introduced in class, a duplicate of the summary booklet was given to each student and they were asked to read it to a family member that evening. So as to encourage participation in their child's reading activity, the family member was



asked to sign and return a note indicating that the summary had been read aloud.

After the third day a new book was introduced to the class and the same process was repeated. The targeted students were regularly asked to read their previous summary booklets and a Running Record was taken within a week of having completed each text. Even if students hadn't achieved an accuracy rate of more than 90%, they moved onto the next text because the main aim was to continue with the practice and development of their decoding and comprehension skills.

Once teachers felt that students had achieved mastery of 40 to 60 word summaries they moved them on to longer summaries of 60 to 90 words and then 90 to 150 words. The final transition stage to the independent reading of books was the provision of picture books that had between 80 to 200 words. No summary was provided at this stage and the book was not read to the students first. The targeted students were asked to read their book to the teacher or paraprofessional three to four times across a few days until they had achieved an appropriate rate of reading and the adult was confident that they had a satisfactory level of comprehension.

The junior primary teachers reported some significant outcomes from this research. They observed a high level of task engagement by the targeted students and noted that they were obviously pleased to be reading the same book as everyone else in the class. This collegiate approach allowed for shared dialogue about the focus text and working with their peers facilitated the opportunity for targeted students to learn skills and strategies from their peers. The repeated readings of the summary cards and booklet quite clearly assisted with the development of increased fluency, improved phrasing and accuracy of word reading. Additionally, with students having frequent opportunities to write about the text, teachers were able to provide scaffolding in written language structures and processes with reference to a shared text. When teachers compared baseline, formative and summative data they saw clear evidence of marked improvements in student fluency, accuracy and comprehension.

### ***What did the approach look like with older students?***

Primary and secondary teachers trialed a different way of including their students with learning difficulties in the reading of a class novel. The novel was introduced by viewing a video of the text. Some teachers were concerned about whether the film would be faithful to the novel and, if it wasn't, what effect that would have on the students. At a later time, those films that significantly varied from the text were compared in relation to the plots, insights and characters. No teacher commented that this had caused confusion for their students. After viewing the film,



there was general discussion about what students had seen and the pronunciation and meaning of key vocabulary was clarified.

The teacher gave non-targeted students copies of the novel to read and tasks to undertake at the completion of each chapter. Such tasks included use of cloze activities, lost and found posters, time-lines, story maps, character profiles, location of quotes, questions and the making of mobiles and dioramas. Teachers did comment that they were unable to use text prediction activities for these students as they had learnt the storyline from the video, but this was overcome by stopping the video at critical points and asking for suggestions about what was going to happen next.

With some texts, teachers read a different chapter in each lesson (dependent on length) to the targeted students. The students then read their chapter summary and moved into the focus questions and activities. Teachers seized the teachable moment to focus on the development of word attack skills and used think-aloud problem solving strategies to model what options students could use. The chapter summaries were very popular with the students. They enjoyed the opportunity to read the same text as everyone else in the class and so were able to actively participate in discussions about the text. They also took the opportunity to use the summaries as a working document and would highlight difficult words, write next to pieces of significant text and generally engage much more fully in the reading.

Unanticipated information came out of this action research. A secondary teacher discovered that some students who had presented as having a learning difficulty were in fact reluctant readers. She commented that this had implications for the need to have some kind of diagnostic information about students' current level of reading skill and that assuming they could all manage the text was inadvisable. When these reluctant readers were questioned they commented that since they had been in secondary school they had not been asked to read a complete novel and they hadn't engaged in novel reading as a leisure option. The teacher believed that these students were short on practice and, as a consequence, their interest and skills in reading had plummeted. She also observed that when asked to read an entire text, these reluctant readers couldn't or wouldn't apply themselves. She felt that the chapter summaries were a huge advantage for these students, as they provided a way to get back into reading that was not overly demanding. This teacher believed that, even in junior secondary English classes, students should be expected to read complete texts, that they should be regularly read to and they should be provided with in-class silent reading time.

During the course of the action research it became evident that careful teacher planning was required in the selection of a text/video that had a 'G' rating. Alternatively, teachers needed to be mindful of seeking parent permission if they wished to use a different film classification.



## *General outcomes and issues*

While there were a number of positive outcomes from this research, teachers reported that the programming model required them to have a high level of organisation in terms of structures for group work, management of behaviour and preparation of materials. Certainly, some teachers took the opportunity to have a paraprofessional in the class with them for these sessions, as they were able to monitor and assist the non-targeted students. Teachers commented that, when planning activities for the non-targeted students, they became more creative in their provision of follow-up activities about a text. They believed that if they set highly engaging tasks, there would be fewer behaviour problems with these students. This appears to have been the case as teachers reported fewer management issues than they had encountered in other lessons.

Teachers of the junior primary students all commented that initially it took them quite a while to prepare a summary when working to a word limit, while primary and secondary teachers felt they needed to carefully condense a text so that their summary kept the intent of the writer. All teachers believed that they gained an in-depth knowledge of texts through this preparation. Notwithstanding these concerns, the teachers stated that each summary became easier as practice made perfect. While the teachers commented on the time it took to write the summaries, they quickly established networks between them where summaries were exchanged. Further, they commented that when they had summarised a book it was available for subsequent use. One teacher commented that older students or paraprofessionals could write the summaries, after training in the approach.

When teachers were questioned as to whether they would consider using this model again they unanimously agreed and endorsed the use of this approach, which they could adapt to their teaching style and individual class learning needs. All teachers commented on the benefits of having colleagues in their school who were also engaged in the project, as it provided collegial support. A number of teachers were invited to present their research and practice to colleagues in their school and to teachers in their local networks.

There had been initial scepticism from some teachers that the text would be rendered boring for the students by having them read the summary booklet or chapter. However, upon reflection, they believed that the richness of the original text had still been accessible to the targeted students within the initial reading sessions. Some teachers did comment that using this approach shook them out of their comfort zones and challenged them to specifically address the needs of their unsuccessful readers. They liked the introspective nature of their reflective journals that allowed them to consider what they did and why.

Overall, teachers at all levels reported that their targeted students were more confident when engaging in reading tasks and had developed

higher levels of accuracy, fluency, comprehension and word attack skills. Teachers stated that they had a greater sense of structure and purpose to their daily reading program and that working with the targeted students themselves provided deeper insights for their program planning and delivery.

This action research provided valuable information about an apparently successful approach that teachers could use when planning inclusive programs to support students with learning difficulties. The strength of this model was that it was in-class, collegial and provided a range of appropriate learning experiences for all learners in a class. It affirmed the belief of Westwood (1997) that it is important to have a real context for reading and writing so that skills are not developed in isolation.

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